

WASHINGTON, STAR
18 MAR 1973

AFTER 20 YEARS

Downey Released

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HONG KONG — More than 20 years after being shot down while resupplying Central Intelligence Agency spies in China, John Thomas Downey emerged from China today by act of clemency from Premier Chou En-lai.

Downey, who is 42, has spent half his life in Chinese prisons. He was smiling and apparently in good health when he crossed the border into Hong Kong.

"I am so glad. It's like a dream," Downey told an American Red Cross representative who met him, Eugene D. Guy.

American officials had a helicopter waiting to whisk Downey to Hong Kong's airport. Within 35 minutes of the time he walked across Lowu bridge from China in a blue Chinese shirt and trousers, a special U.S. Air Force medical evacuation plane was airborne, taking Downey to Clark Air Base in the Philippines.

Operation Homecoming officials at Clark who are handling prisoners released from Vietnam sped Downey on to see his critically ill mother in New Britain, Conn.

Almost immediately after arriving at Clark, Downey boarded an Air Force C141 Starlifter transport which was to fly him via Anchorage, Alaska, to Windsor Locks, Conn.

Downey was accompanied by his brother William who said doctors who flew with them gave John a medical examination and reported he was in good shape.

"He certainly feels and looks good," William Downey said.

Downey spoke briefly to newsmen when he arrived at Clark, United Press International said.

"I just wanted to say how grateful I was for being released. I appreciate the Chinese government for letting me go at this time and President Nixon for his efforts on my behalf and (presidential adviser) Dr. Henry A. Kissinger," he said.

"I'm very pleased to be out," he said. "At the same time, I'm very anxious to get home to see my mother."

"He had a firm handshake and he was up to date, very well informed," one of the officers on the flight from

Hong Kong said. "We were very surprised. He's got no problems at all."

President Nixon asked Chou to release Downey after his mother suffered a stroke Wednesday. Within 48 hours the Chinese informed Washington they would.

Peking also said it would release Thursday the last two Americans known to be imprisoned in China. They are military pilots shot down during the Vietnam war when they strayed over China.

Downey told Red Cross officials he lived for a while with the two fliers, U.S. Navy Lt. Cmdr. Robert J. Flynn, 35, of Houston, Minn., and U.S. Air Force Maj. Philip Smith, 38, of Roodhouse, Ill.

"According to him (Downey), they were in excellent spirits and health," said James E. Bolling, a Red Cross regional director who flew from Hong Kong to the Philippines with Downey.

The two pilots had always been expected to be released when North Vietnam returned prisoners it held there. But the release of Downey was special concession in a new atmosphere of Sino-American friendship.

More Than a Gesture

It was regarded by China-watchers here as more than simply a goodwill gesture, however. It marked the close of what China had considered a long period of U.S. provocation and hostility—a mirror image of the American attitude during the 1950s and 1960s that China was hostile and provocative.

During those years, while Downey sat in prison the U.S. government denied the finding of his trial in China that he was a Central Intelligence Agency agent. Downey and Richard George Fecteau were convicted together as CIA agents.

Fecteau was given a 20-year sentence and released in December 1971 after serving 19 years. Downey's sentence was at that time reduced from life to five more years.

Those actions were taken as a sign of developing friendship. But Peking was not ready then to simply release

Downey.

American officials quietly

stopped insisting that Downey and Fecteau were civilians working for the U.S. Army, whose plane got lost on a flight from Japan to Korea during the Korean war. But they remained unwilling to admit the CIA connection.

Then recently, Nixon, by what seemed almost to have been a slip of the tongue, referred to Downey as a CIA agent. Whether this was finally a public admission which China had sought remains unclear.

Downey emerged into a totally different world political situation.

China and the United States are now coming closer together, although somewhat warily, while China is in hostile confrontation with the Soviet Union. When Downey was shot down Americans saw China and the Soviet Union as partners in the Korean War against the United States.

Downey graduated from Yale University in 1951. The CIA was recruiting healthy young men with a taste for adventure at the time.

According to the finding at a Chinese trial of Downey, Fecteau and a number of Chinese Nationalists, Downey selected and trained Nationalists into teams for espionage.

A four-man team was parachuted into Kirin Province in Northeast China adjoining Korea in July 1952. A larger team was parachuted into adjacent Liaoning Province in September.

Fecteau joined the CIA in 1952, according to the trial report. On the night of Nov. 29, 1952, he accompanied Downey on a DC3 twin-engine transport plane to resupply the Kirin agents and pickup one agent. The plane was shot down.

It was only two years later in announcing the trial—at which several of the Chinese agents were sentenced to death and others to long prison terms—that the Chinese re-

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vaeld that Downey and Fecteau were still alive. Surprised, Washington put out a story of their being civilians on a lost army plane.

When U.N. Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold visited China in 1955, he obtained the release of 11 Americans from another plane which the Chinese said had been shot down while dropping agents. It was a U.S. Air Force plane which Hammarskjold said was part of the U.N. command in Korea, but, the Chinese said, Hammarskjold told them the United States had not claimed that Downey and Fecteau were part of the U.N. command, so he did not seek their release.

The American Red Cross was allowed to send parcels to the two prisoners. Downey's mother visited him three times in Peking during the years when almost no other Americans were allowed to go to China.

Sweeteners Helped

Guy said today that Downey told him artificial sweeteners in parcels helped him avoid getting fat on Chinese food.

Guy gave a receipt for Downey to Chinese officials who escorted him to the border. It said that "the American people are most appreciative for this humanitarian action on the part of the Peoples Republic of China."

At the request of the U.S. Consulate, reporters were kept away from Downey by British police. The consulate's press release on his passage through this British colony mentioned only Red Cross officials but American diplomats hovered in the background of the operation.

One diplomat, a specialist on Chinese internal politics who is almost exactly Downey's age, Sherrod McCall, met Downey at the border and flew with him to the Philippines as escort officer.

So far as could be learned, no one from the CIA section of the U.S. Consulate was present.